Storytelling and Literary Texts in ELT: Future Directions

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1. Introduction

Whether we read or tell stories, they have surely been part of humanity as long as we have been using language. Saunders (1997, pp. 1-5) lists 10 reasons why (in his opinion) humans need good stories:

1. Stories are a playground for language.
2. Stories create community.
3. Stories help us to build empathy by seeing through the eyes of other people.
4. Stories show us the consequences of our actions.
5. Stories educate our desires.
6. Stories help us dwell in place—they help us recognize that we belong to the earth, blood and brain and bone, and that we are kin to other creatures.
7. Stories help us dwell in time by orienting us in private and public time… Stories teach us that every gesture, every act, every choice we make sends ripples of influence into the future.
8. Stories help us deal with suffering, loss, and death.
9. Stories teach us how to be human.
10. Stories acknowledge the wonder and mystery of Creation.

Even as compelling as the previous statements might be, it is important to look at past research to see if such notions about stories can be substantiated.

2. What Research Tells us

In order to fully address the challenge presented (substantiate claims about the beneficial nature of stories and storytelling) the following sections will survey the research literature on 1) effects of reading literature (especially narratives/stories), 2) effects of listening to stories, 3) effects of telling stories (verbally and in writing).

2.1 Effects of reading literature

Before looking at the reading of literary texts specifically, it is important to

acknowledge that reading is in itself important for personal development. Research by Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) indicated that the sheer volume of reading done by a child affects his or her acquisition of not only vocabulary but also a variety of skills. One reason for this is related to the relatively impoverished nature of the lexicon in speech. They gave as an example:

> With the exception of the special situation of courtroom testimony, the average frequency of the words in all of the samples of oral speech is quite low, hovering in the 400-600 range of ranks. The relative rarity of the words in children's books is, in fact, greater than that in all of the adult conversation, except for the courtroom testimony. Indeed, the words used in children's books are considerably rarer than those in the speech on prime-time adult television. (p. 2)

They cite research by Hayes and Ahrens (1988) that clearly shows the relative richness of printed texts in comparison with speech.

Table 1. Selected Statistics for major sources of spoken and written language

		Rank of Median Word	Rare Words per 1000
I.	Printed texts		
	Abstracts of scientific articles	4389	128.0
	Newspapers	1690	68.3
	Popular magazines	1399	65.7
	Adult books	1058	52.7
	Comic books	867	53.5
	Children's books	627	30.9
	Preschool books	578	16.3
II.	Television texts		
	Popular prime-time adult shows	490	22.7
	Popular prime-time children's shows	543	20.2
	Cartoon shows	598	30.8
	Mr. Rogers and *Sesame Street*	413	2.0
III.	Adult speech		
	Expert witness testimony	1008	28.4
	College graduates to friends, spouses	496	17.3

Adapted from Hayes and Ahrens (1988).

Research on reading literary texts and fiction show similar positive results. Berns, et al. (2013) found that reading a novel improves brain function on a variety of levels including increased empathy, and the ability to simulate the experience of doing what they read about—similar to the kind of muscle memory experienced by athletes when they engage in visualization exercises. According to research by Sullivan and Brown

(2014; 2015), children who read for pleasure made more progress in math, vocabulary, and spelling, between the ages of 10 and 16, than those who rarely read; the results were even more extraordinary for those aged 16-46, namely that reading habits established in childhood continue to affect the development of vocabulary in adult years.

Furthermore, reading novels increases tolerance and reduces prejudice (Vezzali, et. al., 2015). Vezzali and his associates (2015) conducted one experimental intervention with elementary school children and two cross-sectional studies with high school and university students in Italy and United Kingdom. They found that the readers who identified with the hero (Harry Potter) and dis-identified with the villain (Voldemort) showed improved attitudes towards stigmatized groups such as immigrants, homosexuals, and refugees. This is because the readers feel empathy for Harry. Vezzali states,

> Harry Potter empathizes with characters from stigmatized categories, tries to understand their sufferings and to act towards social equality. So, I and my colleagues think that empathic feelings are the key factor driving prejudice reduction. The world of Harry Potter is characterized by strict social hierarchies and resulting prejudices, with obvious parallels with our society. Harry has meaningful contact with characters belonging to stigmatized groups. He tries to understand them and appreciate their difficulties, some of which stem from intergroup discrimination, and fights for a world free of social inequalities. (cited from Bergland, 2015)

Vezzali's research is in line with earlier research by Mello (2001) who reported that children benefit from better relationships with each other in the classroom as a result of being exposed to narratives.

2.2 Effects of listening to stories

When a teacher reads aloud to students, the students' vocabulary and grasp of syntax and sentence structure improves (Paul, 2012). Reading aloud to children has positive benefits according to Lemov (2015), who states,

> Children, who are read to, become familiar with the sound and rhythm and complexity of language long before they can produce it themselves. By virtue of being exposed to a wide variety of writing types and styles, they come to understand that the use of language involves intentional choices made by the author, and is

representative of the author's time and place. (Cited in Paul, 2012, p.2)

Empathy is also a powerful force unleashed by storytelling and listening to stories. This can be seen by research done by neuroscientist, Paul Zak, who has looked at the chemical responses in the brain when hearing a story. "Stories that follow a classic dramatic arc evoke powerful empathic responses associated with specific neurochemicals, namely cortisol and oxytocin" (Zak, 2014, n.p.). Zak found that those empathetic feelings were so powerful that they moved participants to concrete actions such as donating to charity (even giving money to fellow research participants). So it may be fair to state that stories not only entertain us; they can determine our lives and personal identities (Kearney, 2001).

2.3 Effects of telling (and writing) stories

Positive benefits in improved speaking skills and ultimate learning achievement have been reported by Hwang, et al. (2014) in their study of applied storytelling in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom on a Web-based multimedia system. Figg and McCartney (2010) found enhanced skills and sustained interest among previously underachieving learners in their project using digital storytelling tools (a topic discussed in more detail later). Abdullah (2012) reported positive learner attitudes toward vocabulary learning, through storytelling (and retelling) activities for college age learners and Huang (2006) observed better comprehension for young EFL students who participated in story listening plus illustrated-text reading in comparison with text-only reading. Therefore storytelling, with the addition of visual and aural components can scaffold the story reading experience for young EFL learners.

3. Understanding Stories and Storytelling

So, how do we understand stories? When a story is told, the storyteller uses a number of features and strategies to ensure that the story has the quality of high "tellability" (Bowles, 2010) and thus is comprehensible.

3.1 Discourse features and strategies of storytelling

Table 2 is a schematic summary of the ideas presented in Bowles (2010, pp. 67-75) regarding storytelling discourse features. Typically, stories (like many other forms of discourse) have a beginning (preface), middle (body), and an ending (closings). The preface may be a bid to tell a story, catching the attention of the audience. It may also be an appeal to shared knowledge. The story body unfolds with the strategic use of

discourse markers (signaling the hierarchy of time, or constructing a joint attitude between the teller and the listener), reference (nouns, pronouns, pro/nominal phrases) and markers of time (verb tense—usually past but sometimes 'narrative present'). The end of the telling is signaled through combinations of summative statements, evaluations and commentaries.

Table 2. Story structure and discourse features (adapted from Bowles, 2010, pp. 67-75)

preface	A proposal to tell a story	"Have you heard the one about___?"
	Foregrounding common knowledge	"Remember__? Tell them/let me tell you about___.
body	Discourse markers (DM)	
	Temporal DM	so/then/after/
	Attitude signal DM	I mean/you know/mind you/oh
	Reference	nouns, pronouns, renominalization
	Markers of time	verb tense (usually past, but sometime narrative present)
closings	Comment/summary	"___never___again."
	Summary/ evaluation	"___happily ever after."

Storytellers also must keep their audience's attention and also convey attitudes of the characters speaking within the story. They manage to do this through what Bowles (2010, pp. 77-91) calls *tellability markers* (repetition, formulaicity, prosodic effects, imagery/detail, direct speech, ellipsis, metaphor/metonymy, irony and hyperbole) and *attitude markers* (intensity, interactional remembering, and story formulations). Strategies like the use of repetition and formulaic language increase the comprehensibility of a story and make it memorable, so it is little wonder that stories function so well for language learning (Hendrickson, 1992; Fitzgibbon & Hughes Wilhelm, 1998).

3.2 Pedagogical guidelines for storytelling

Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) offer guidelines for storytelling by teachers in classroom:

- Start with short stories, which do not challenge the students' concentration.
- Make sure that everyone in the class can see you and hear your voice easily.
- Read or tell slowly and clearly. Give students enough time to understand, ask

questions and make comments.

- Encourage students to participate, by repeating key vocabulary items and phrases.
- Use gestures, mime, and facial expressions to help convey the meaning.
  Vary the tone and volume of your voice in order to give the meaning you intended to tell. (p. 22)

4. Future Developments

Although there may be many other new developments in the area of storytelling, the following two, *Digital Storytelling* and *Flash Fiction* are especially relevant to a discussion of future developments in ELT.

4.1 Digital storytelling

"Digital storytelling is storytelling that contains some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video clips, or music" (Stanley & Dillingham, 2011). The argument for use of this means of generating stories centers on notions of current learners being "digital natives" surrounded by technology from their earliest years in their lives away from school yet strangely experiencing a virtually digital-free life in school. The claim is that by harnessing digital media, students will be more engaged in learning and this will improve rates of literacy (Stanley & Dillingham, 2011). To their credit, Stanley and Dillingham posit,

> …the learner's storytelling is more important than the technology. Technology can enhance a story. However, an engaging story with an interesting beginning, problem, solution, and ending should be the driving force behind any project…. No technology or special effects can replace a well-developed story complete with literary elements and personal voice. (2011, p. 25)

They advocate a social, constructivist, inquiry-based approach (c.f. Palmer, Harshberger & Koch, 2001) that enables learners to be more aware of their language use, exposes them to contextualized meaningful language-in-use, allows them to communicate authentically while integrating their skill use/development in meaningful communicative contexts. Appendix A summarizes the kinds of story ideas they suggest for beginner, intermediate and advanced level EFL students.

4.2 Flash fiction

Another trend that will have far reaching educational effects in the future is *flash fiction*, which is a short form of storytelling that can take many shapes, sizes and formats. It can range in length from from one sentence to 1500 words but must have a plot and at least one character. Marshall (2010, p. 1) summarizes it best:

> Some practitioners enjoy working in specialized forms such as the 55er (10 sentences, beginning with 10 words, each line with one fewer word, ending in one word--totaling 55 words), the 69er (a story of exactly 69 words), the Drabble (a story of exactly 100 words) or the 369 (one story with an overall title, consisting of three thematically linked 69ers, each with its own title--in other words, 3 69s). Whatever the form, the flash fiction story delivers quick satisfaction, something we all crave in our breathless, short-attention-span world.

Hemingway foreshadowed the basic premise of flash fiction, "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows" and is even credited with perhaps the earliest example of flash fiction:

For sale: Baby shoes, never worn. (Ernest Hemingway)

Harrington (2010) and Ingermanson (2015) both claim that writing flash fiction is good for a developing writer because it demands discipline to maintain the short, parsimonious expression this genre requires. Ingermanson (2015, p. 1) states that the strict word limit forces (you) the writer to:

- Get your story structure right before you start
- Make every word pull its weight
- Make every sentence do "double-duty" in plot, characters, story world, and/or theme
- … Flash fiction makes you a better writer. It forces you to write tighter, more strategically.

However, to date there have been no studies to verify any of these claims so for the time being we can only speculate on the potential of flash fiction for the development of writing.

4.3 Potentials and pitfalls

Humans (especially in the teaching profession) tend to be optimistic and none are more optimistic than early-adopters of new technology. What usually happens is that

hyperbole and hype about the new technology produces hundreds of articles touting the potential and promise. Rarely is there hard evidence from reputable research studies to support the claims. History may well be repeating itself again with flash fiction and the replacement of paper based reading with digital forms.

For example, although writing flash fiction might be a good exercise for language learners, reading flash fiction can be no substitute for reading long fiction. Consider the following case study:

Case study: Dragon Tales as explained by S. Joan Popek (n. d., n. p.)

Dragon Tales

"Why're you here?" the dragon bellowed. "Where's my virgin?"

"No virgins."

"No virgins?"

"Not one. None to be had. They've all been had." She winked seductively.

"Not funny! Every six months, I get a virgin. That's the deal. I never re-ally liked virgin. Too bland. Humans decided that dragons eat virgins." He patted his stomach. "I've a sensitive stomach, so I agreed."

"I brought pigs."

"BAH!"

"No pigs?"

"No!"

She paled.

He gobbled her up, then burped smoke. "I do like a spicy wench, but they sure don't like me. Now where did I put that antacid?"

*****

The story's success depends on the reader's acquaintance with fairy tales to fill in what's implied. The setting is near a cave because that's where dragons live in fairy tales. It assumes that the reader expects dragons to eat virgins, but perhaps has never questioned why. The conflict is in the dragon's decision to eat a non-virgin even knowing it will give him heart- burn. Resolution? The girl foolish enough to approach the dragon in the first place gets eaten. The ending provides the twist because usually the heroine outwits the dragon. The change in this case occurs in the reader's mind as his or her perception of fairy tales changes.

Popek, herself states “The story's success depends on the reader's acquaintance with

fairy tales to fill in what's implied…" which means, her flash fiction would not be successful for someone who has not read full length fairy tales (likely but not necessarily, in print form). Hence, it is not flash fiction that makes good readers—it is good readers that make flash fiction possible/meaningful.

This brings us to the crux of a growing problem that is going to erode intellect and atrophy reader ability—the pervasiveness of online *cursory* reading to the detriment of offline, deep reading. Some research is already bearing this out; Plester, Wood and Bell (2008) found that children who used their mobiles to send three or more text messages a day had significantly lower academic scores than children who sent none. However, the children who, when asked to write a text message, showed greater use of text abbreviations ('textisms') tended to have better performance on a measure of verbal reasoning ability, which is highly associated with Key Stage 2 (KS2) and 3 English scores.

What could be some of the reasons for this? Again, researchers have found that when people use the internet, they skim through the pages quickly, reading an average of 20% of the text per page (Nielsen, 2008; Weinreich, *et al.*, 2008). Although skimming and reading bits a pieces of text is not confined to online reading, it is much more prevalent online than offline. The brain constantly adapts to new patterns of input and it is not yet clear in ways such reading styles might be changing and shaping brain responses (Carr, 2008). Carr comments on his own experience of screen reading, "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words," he analogizes, but "now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski" (2008, p. 57). This kind of reading leads to a decreased amount of comprehension (Dyson & Haselgrove, 2000; Jackson, 2008) although it could be argued they are accessing information.

However, the accessing of information and the acquisition of knowledge are different things entirely (Bauerlein, 2008). Could this be leading to, as Wolf states, a "society of decoders of information, whose false sense of knowing distracts from a deeper development of ... intellectual potential" (2008, p. 226)? Only time, and proper research, will tell.

5. Final comments

This paper looked at the issues connected to stories, storytelling/writing, story listening and the use of literary texts in language teaching. New technologies are an added complication—they offer much potential and promise, yet since we know so little about how they are affecting the way the human brain functions, there are elements of peril.

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Appendix A: Digital Storytelling Projects by Level (summarized from Stanley & Dillingham, 2011 pp. 27-28)

Beginner Learn/practice basics, find voice	Intermediate Hone sense of own voice, use literary and content materials	Advanced Use storytelling as a community changing device, expert voice
Personal stories Use sound, expression movement, create visual portrait, practice retelling	Use authoring software (e.g. iMovie) for creative retellings of favorite stories, events, and books	Explore identities through storytelling about gender race and culture.
Narrative paragraph to be shared by email, blog or social network	Enter video contest and produce a film story about historic or scientific events	Challenge familiar stories about controversial people and events by examining what is missing or underrepresented.
Record a personal story (audio only or video), focus on pacing, inflection, tone	Research folklore or urban legends to produce a podcast, webinar or YouTube for a digital story telling festival	Interview recent immigrants and retell their stories creatively (e.g., claymation, puppetry, kid's ebook, etc.)
Use internet to collect sound, images for a PowerPoint story presentation	Produce a digital recipe book including stories, publish as DVD, use as a fund raiser	Influence and guide others toward a civic minded goal, creating a public service campaign